

This week our nation felt the loss of Robin Williams and Lauren Bacall, two actors who died and left many reflecting on the meaning of their lives. Our nation has also tried to understand the shooting death of Michael Brown and the just-released video of his apparent robbery of a convenience store. For me, this video messed up the image I had of him being a totally innocent victim of an overly-violent police officer. We struggle as we witness escalating tensions and violence.

We want things in life to be clear-cut and totally understandable; they seldom are.

A pastor once challenged the people of his congregation to chose FOUR WORDS that they would like to have put on their gravestone as an epitaph. I can imagine all sorts of possibilities. For the people of Israel out there in the wilderness with Moses, we might put: THESE FOLKS ALWAYS COMPLAINED! For our less-than-stellar Congress, we might put: TOO SELF-SERVING TO SERVE. For Janet Morton and other dear ones we have known in this congregation, wonderful words could be used: GRACIOUS TO THE END, or A FRIEND OF ALL, or GAVE JOY TO OTHERS or CHANNEL OF GOD'S LOVE. For me and probably for some of the rest of us, as we struggle with various aspects of our lives, the epitaph could read: SCARED TO STEP FORWARD. But for the Canaanite woman (a non-Jew with no status in her day) who demanded mercy and healing for her daughter from Jesus, the words would have to be Jesus' words to her: GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! (Basic idea from Brett Blair, *esermons*, several years ago)

There were only *two* individuals who received praise for their faith from Jesus, this non-Jewish woman and the also-desperate Roman soldier whose beloved servant was dying (Luke 7). Usually, and especially with his own disciples, Jesus found himself disappointed in the lack of faith: Where is your faith? O ye of little faith...

Speaking of little faith: It was about a month and a half since the people had been delivered out of Egypt, and they were in the midst of a desert... The Bible offers a not-so-pretty picture of these folks who were so important to, so chosen by, God: "There in the desert they all complained to Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'We wish that the Lord had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death!'" (Exodus 16)

The words of God's chosen people. God had walked with them, given them water when they thirsted, saved them miraculously out of the hands of the Egyptians, delivered them through the Red Sea... Now - and not for the first time! - these chosen people were complaining again, full of fear and anger, accusing God and Moses of having let them down.

So what did God do? God gave them bread, manna from heaven.. And quails, so that all were satisfied... As God provided, God tried to give them a gentle lesson in having faith. Gather only enough for each day... Of course later in the chapter you will see that some persons tried gathering more than provisions for one day, but the stuff rotted... Lessons of faith: "Give us this

day our daily bread..." And so God does, God gives us opportunities to exercise our faith...

The lessons we heard today offer contrasts. In Exodus, we heard about the *chosen* people of Israel, the ones who would soon be given the promised land, the scriptures, the law and the continued presence of God; the ones who were once NO people, now called to be God's people so that by their blessedness they could provide blessing for all the peoples of the earth.

But in Matthew 15, which Daniel read, we saw the Canaanite woman... so *un-chosen*, so much an outsider. In the Old Testament the Jewish people were specifically forbidden to have anything to do with the Canaanites, so it would not have surprised anybody in Jesus' day that Jesus wanted nothing to do with her. In addition to her heritage, she was a woman. So she had no right to even approach Jesus. The story from Matthew, then, quite purposefully sets up the woman as a total outsider, a complete nobody, a person with whom Jesus would naturally have had no association, and vice versa.

In spite of this, the woman had been following Jesus and now begged him to help her. Her daughter had a demon and was dying. Jesus' disciples told him to send her away. When they did that, the woman joined some pretty good gospel company. The gospels tell that the disciples told Jesus to send the crowd of more than 5000 people away when it got to be dinner time. Instead, Jesus had them become part of a miraculous feeding. Another time, the disciples tried to keep little children away from Jesus. Instead, Jesus gathered a child into his arms and warned everybody that to such did God's kingdom belong.

So what do these scriptures do for us? For one thing, they show people reacting to life's tough times in two different ways, even as they turn to God. One way is to assault God with complaint and anger and lack of trust - "God, I can't go on, I might as well end my life, there's no way to get through this mess... There's no hope. You're not doing what I want you to... Why did you let this happen to me?" (pause) The other way is more in line with the strength of the Canaanite woman: "God, I believe that you are here, and that you can help me. Even if I only hear silence, I shall rely on you. Even if it seems that I am cast away, that you are rejecting me, I will trust in you. I believe in Jesus, and through him I am your child... You are my master... Even crumbs from your table are sufficient for me."

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. Jesus was able to say to that foreign woman, "Great is your faith. May your daughter be healed as you desire." (pause)

Jesus' questions of the Canaanite woman seem harsh to us. But without them, her unswerving faith might have been overlooked. Had she approached Jesus and fallen to her knees and he simply said, "I see how you're suffering. I know the pain of your daughter's condition. Go, for I see your faith and even at this moment I am healing your daughter," there would have been little real impact for us today.

We live in a dangerous time and place, for it's too easy for us to feel that we are "insiders." Our

world is full of people who call themselves “Christians” but who seem to delight in labeling others are “outsiders,” as those who do not deserve the good life we have here in the United States. I think of those children on our border with Mexico and give thanks for the many Christians who have seen the challenge as a faith issue. They have remembered that Jesus welcomed those others would turn away. And he warned us all in Matthew 25 that we will be judged, not on whether or not we thought of ourselves as Insiders or “chosen people,” but whether or not we fed, clothed, and took care of the powerless we might easily choose to ignore.

Who might the "dogs" be today? Who are the forgotten, the downtrodden, the overlooked, the avoided? People in places of war. People who don't have bread for today or tomorrow. People in countries where there is terrible instability, and wherever people cannot see much of a future for their children or for themselves, perhaps right here in Winsted... People dealing with illness, grief, or rejection... Those hooked on drugs... Those so hopeless and angry about life that they have been caught up in acts of violence....

We are followers of Christ, Christians. We have become heirs through faith in Jesus Christ. We become heirs by remembering that God has given us life and all that we know thus far, and by trusting, especially when we don't "see" it or hear it, that God yet has us in God's everlasting arms. God yet has work for us to do.

We "chosen" Christians may very well be fatigued, because the "race" set before us in this day and location is very difficult. It's hard because it doesn't always seem like a race, or even like an event... We don't have to defend our faith before bloody executioners... Instead we race against our own indifference, despair, weariness, circumstances, and disappointments.

The message of the Bible for those who see themselves as chosen, for those who feel like outsiders, and for you and me, is this: God's grace is sufficient for all of us. God yearns for us to develop our faith. God wants us to dare to do some tough things: to accept bread for one day at a time, and to continue praying when we experience only silence. Dare to believe in this man Jesus, and then walk forward as though we have been adopted by God. We must not forget that the Lord we are trying to follow is the One who gave life-saving “crumbs” to a person nobody thought should receive them. If we follow Jesus Christ, we can do no less!

There's an old illustration about faith that can be found in several versions. I share one now: It's about Blondin, the famous French tightrope walker. In 1894, Blondin strung a tightrope across the Niagra Falls and, before thousands of cheering people, inched his way from the Canadian side to the United States side of the falls. When he arrived safely, the crowd yelled his name over and over again, “Blondin! Blondin! Blondin!”

Blondin shouted back at the crowd, “I am Blondin! Do you believe in me?”

The crowd responded by screaming, “We believe! We believe!”

Blondin then asked, “Do you believe that I can go back across the falls on that rightrope carrying

someone on my shoulders?"

Again, the crowd shouted, "We believe! We believe!"

Blondin then asked, "Who will be that human being?"

There was dead silence. After an uncomfortable minute or two, one man finally stepped forward (it turned out to be Blondin's business manager). He climbed up on Blondin's shoulders and allowed Blondin to precariously carry him back to the other side of the falls.

So easy to talk about, so easy to cheer, so hard to live out.

"Great is your faith," Jesus told the Canaanite woman.

For all of us, as we live in these days of dismal news and increasing threats, may we find ways to trust the abundant love and mercy of God, and then let us live as though we do. Even the crumbs are enough. God's loving grace is sufficient for us all.

May our lives be offered, day after day, in such a way as to show God's exceeding love, acceptance, mercy, forgiveness and healing to every person, even those we may not want to know; and may we finally be greeted by our Lord Jesus Christ with the words: "Great is your faith!" Amen.